

Visit to Afghanistan Affirms Need for Continuing U.S. Presence

by

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I recently returned from a nine-day trip to Afghanistan and Central Asia that allowed me to see the devastation resulting from twenty years of war, the wonder of refugee children learning to read and write, the expertise of America's military men and women, and the hope and joy of a people who are no longer oppressed. The main purpose of the trip was to observe the ways in which U.S. humanitarian aid is being delivered in the area and to assess the need for future assistance.

We flew into Uzbekistan and met with government officials as well as staff from the United Nations and the U.S. Embassy. We did the same in Tajikistan. Because of the aid from the United States and other countries, there will be no starvation in the region this year.

We flew to Islamabad and stayed briefly before continuing on to an air base about 70 kilometers from Kabul, the capital of Afghanistan. As the armored caravan drove south, the evidence of two decades of war was striking. The wreckage of Soviet airplanes, tanks and other armored vehicles litter the sides of the road all the way to the capital.

Once in Kabul, however, it was gratifying to witness the new vitality of the war-torn city, particularly the increasing number of women enjoying their new freedoms. As representatives of the United States we were warmly received by the people of Afghanistan. On the streets of Kabul we were thanked for relieving them from the oppression of the Taliban.

I was particularly struck by the sight of a man on a bicycle carrying shoes that he had made to sell them at the local market. In most developing countries such an activity would be commonplace. But it is a truly remarkable thing to see in Afghanistan, where just weeks earlier this simple commercial enterprise would have been impossible.

We met with Hamid Karzai, Afghanistan's interim leader. Karzai is an impressive man. He struck me as a thoughtful, decent and capable leader. He thinks outside of Afghanistan's warlord system and sees the potential for a unified nation.

I asked Karzai to tell us what was the country's most fundamental need in the effort to realize that potential. Without hesitating he responded that stability and security were most essential. Stability will not be possible without security, he said, and security will not be possible without a strong U.S. presence. Education, transportation and a strong economy will follow if the country is stable.

As we left Kabul, a German military unit, part of the international peacekeeping force, was entering the capital. This is the first time since World War II that Germany has conducted military activity outside of its borders.

We flew back to Islamabad where we met with Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf. I have had great concerns about Musharraf since he came to power by way of a military coup. But Musharraf is an important partner for the United States. Ironically, under his regime the people of Pakistan enjoy greater freedom than they had under the previous, ostensibly democratic, government. It is important to remember that the Taliban would not have been able to take power in Afghanistan without the help of the previous Pakistani regime. Taliban leaders and fighters trained in Pakistan before going to Afghanistan.

Musharraf impressed me as an intelligent and moderate leader who is eager to work with the United States. I also believe he is making a sincere effort to address the problems between Pakistan and India.

Secretary of State Colin Powell was also in Islamabad to meet with Musharraf. We had a short meeting with him during which we briefed each other on our activities.

While in Pakistan, we also had the opportunity to tour a school that teaches children who were literally taken off of garbage piles where they rummaged for food and items to sell. The United States is the largest source of funding for this program. It was a delight to watch these forty children, full of the joy of life and happy in a safe environment, learning to read and write.

One of our last stops was a visit to the aircraft carrier, the U.S.S. Theodore Roosevelt in the Indian Ocean. I was immediately struck by the youth of the sailors -the average age of the crew is nineteen- adroitly executing the most complex tasks with human lives in the balance. Our troops are upbeat and committed to the task at hand. We can be proud of their efforts.

On the way back to the United States we stopped in Rome to visit the former King of Afghanistan Zahir Shah. Soon Karzai will travel to Rome and bring Shah back to Afghanistan. While the king is no longer capable of leading the country, his presence there will be strong symbol of national unity.

Having seen the situation firsthand, there is no doubt in my mind that a strong U.S. presence in Afghanistan is essential to the stability of the region. The power vacuum that was created when the Soviet Union was driven from the country resulted in incomprehensible devastation and suffering. Ultimately the Taliban was able to take control. For our own sake and for the sake of the people of Afghanistan, we cannot allow that to happen again.